

❁ 9 ❁

“A CALL SOUNDED FROM THE ARMENIAN  
MOUNTAINS OF ERZERUM”

*Rubina Peroomian*

Western Armenians experienced a social, cultural, and political renaissance in the second half of the nineteenth century. The manifestation of this reawakening was felt especially in Constantinople, the intellectual and communal administrative center of the Western Armenians. Indeed, the revitalized cultural life, the prospects of the Armenian religious minority's newly adopted Azgayin Sahmanadrutiun (National Constitution or Statutes, 1863) to regulate the affairs of the community (*millet*), and the pledges of the European powers to intercede with the sultan for the amelioration of the unbearable conditions in the interior Ottoman provinces (*vilayets*) had created an atmosphere of hope and optimism among the intelligentsia.

The picture was dramatically different, however, in the eastern provinces, where cultural life was stifled, political activity suppressed, and national expression censored. In a land where the perniciousness of the local Turkish or Kurdish authorities was the prevailing way of life, the Armenian National Constitution had little bearing. As stated by Bishop Mkrtich (Mgrdich) Khrimian (known affectionately as “Hayrik”), who was elected Patriarch in 1869, the Constantinople intelligentsia, which had invested so much time in drafting the statutes, knew Europe better than the geography and the physical makeup of Armenia. The people whom the Sahmanadrutiun should have served lived not on the shores of the Bosphorus but in the remote Armenian provinces.<sup>1</sup> Aside from its intrinsic shortcomings, the Constitution

---

<sup>1</sup> Khrimian's views on the *Sahmanadrutiun* are cited in T.E.G. (Bishop Torgom

lacked the power and means to put an end to the harrowing conduct of Kurdish chieftains against their Armenian subject *rayas*, the seizure of their crops and cattle, the abduction of their daughters, and the usurpation of their lands. The government officials or the army units stationed in every province turned a blind eye and in some instances even helped the Kurds in their plunder of the Armenian villages.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the reform measures promulgated by the sultans, such as the *Hatt-i Sherif* or Noble Rescript of 1839 and the *Hatt-i Humayun* or Imperial Rescript of 1856, which guaranteed the equality of all subjects before the law,<sup>3</sup> the government with its agrarian policies and tax-collection practices actually facilitated the transfer to Muslims of Armenian-owned lands in places such as Van, Mush, Bitlis, and Bardzr Hayk or Upper Armenia, with the city of Karin/Erzerum as its center.<sup>4</sup> The practice was common and gradually intensified to the extent that even the properties of the Armenian Church were not exempt. Eremia Tevkants, who undertook a fact-finding mission in Bardzr Hayk and Vaspurakan (Van), reported to Patriarch Mkrtich Khrimian in 1873 that the Turks and Kurds were usurping the lands of Armenian villagers and that repeated complaints to the local officials were unavailing.<sup>5</sup> In fact, there was evidence that the

Gushakian), *Khrimian Hayrik* (Paris: Imprimerie Artistique, 1925), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, Charles B. Norman, the special correspondent of the *London Times*, regularly sent detailed reports from the battlefield, including much information on the local demography and the overall situation, past and present. His reports, which also contain descriptions of the deplorable condition of Armenians and other Christians in the eastern provinces, are compiled in C.B. Norman, *Armenia and the Campaign of 1877* (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin [1878]), esp. pp. 70-71, 317-31.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the two reform edicts, see Hagop Barsoumian "The Eastern Question and the Tanzimat Era," in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 2 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 180-82.

<sup>4</sup> Haykaz M. Poghosyan, *Vaspurakanipatmutyunits (1850-1900)* [From the History of Vaspurakan (1850-1900)] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1988), p. 64. Citing an article in *Aragats* (Constantinople, 1920, no. 51, p. 708), Poghosyan adds that in 1870 the government granted permission to the Kurdish aghas and beys to "purchase" Armenian lands, paying next to nothing, through a special arrangement ("legal *tapu*") to legitimize the transfer of land to the new owner.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

government facilitated the Kurdish actions.

During the June 14, 1877 session of the Ottoman Parliament, Hamazasp Pallarian (Ballarian), the Armenian representative of the province of Erzerum, addressed this issue and expressed discontent with the government's failure to halt the Kurdish exactions and constant harassment of Armenians.<sup>6</sup> His investigation about this situation had revealed the state's high political reason (*hikmet-i hükumat*), which was to keep the Kurds content in order to use them against possible Armenian insurgency or to fight against the Russians in case of war.<sup>7</sup>

Living in the comparative peace and comfort of the capital city, Armenians in Constantinople knew very little about the existing plight in the eastern provinces. Thanks to the efforts of Patriarch Khrimian, information from the provinces, especially the "Report about Exploitations" that included an extensive list of violations of rights, discrimination, and persecution, exposed the true face of the prevailing conditions. The socio-cultural renaissance that was so enthusiastically extolled in the press and in artistic literature in the capital had made little headway among the Armenian masses in the eastern provinces.

The situation was unbearable in Erzerum. Only a half century earlier, Erzerum was the heart of the largest of the three *pashaliks* on the Armenian Plateau (the others being Diarbekir and Kharput or Kharpert) and encompassed most of the historic lands

---

<sup>6</sup> The Ottoman Parliament was convened with 86 deputies, of whom 38 were Christian. Daniel Kharajian represented the city of Erzerum, and Hamazasp Pallarian, the province. For a list of other Armenian representatives, see Eghishe Geghamiants, *Hayeri azatagrakan sharzhumnere XIX darum, kam Haykakan Harts'i hingerord shrjane* [The Liberation Movements of Armenians in the Nineteenth Century, or the Fifth Phase of the Armenian Question] (Baku: Erevantsian Elektr. Press, 1915), p. 321.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 318-21. Geghamiants notes that Pallarian's exposé so moved the representatives that the Parliament called on the Sublime Porte to take immediate measures to stop the Kurdish excesses. The petition was left unanswered. Pallarian's address, published in the journal *Masis* on June 19, 1877, is also cited by Mikayel Varandian, *H.H. Dashnaktsutian patmutiun* [History of the A(rmenian) R(evolutionary) F(ederation)], vol. 1 (Paris: Imp. de Navarre, 1932; repr. Tehran: Varandian Press, 1981), p. 38, and by Ghazar Chareg, *Karinapatum: Hushamatian Bardzr Hayki* [Karin: Memorial Volume of Upper Armenia] (Beirut: Garin Compatriotic Unions of the United States and Lebanon, 1957), pp. 184-86.

of Armenian Bardzr Hayk.<sup>8</sup> In some Turkish annals and maps, this region was called *Ermenistan* (Armenia). In an analytic survey of the Armenian Question, Krikor Zohrab (Grigor Zohrap), writing under the pseudonym Marcel Léart, shows the *eyalet* of Erzerum as having the heaviest concentration of Armenian population. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, the Ottoman government partitioned the region to form the vilayets of Van, Erzerum, Bitlis, and Mamuret ul-Aziz (Kharpert). To these vilayets were attached heavily Muslim-populated districts.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, large numbers of Muslims were encouraged to settle in Bardzr Hayk, and the Armenian population, living in wretched conditions, gradually became a minority. From time to time, such as during the Russo-Turkish War, the persecutions would intensify and the traumatic effect would linger for a longer period. The reports of London *Times* correspondent C.B. Norman best captured the scene. More than that, Norman's dispatches were desperate calls to his own government to intervene to put an end to "the desolation that reigns throughout Kurdistan [including Erzerum]<sup>10</sup>—villages deserted, towns abandoned . . . and this is not the work of a power whose policy of selfish aggression no man can defend, but the ghastly acts of Turkey's irregular soldiery on Turkey's most peaceable inhabitants."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Poghosyan, *Vaspurakani patmutyunits*, pp. 7-8, citing Edward Dulaurier.

<sup>9</sup> Marcel Léart, *La Question Arménienne à la lumière des documents* (Paris: Librairie Maritime et Coloniale, 1913), p. 9. Zohrab adds that in 1880, when the Armenian Question was under discussion, the Ottoman government published statistics showing Armenians to be an insignificant minority in the nine eastern vilayets of Aleppo, Adana, Trebizond, Erzerum, Van, Bitlis, Diarbekir, Mamuret ul-Aziz, and Sivas, with 762,760 Armenians and 283,000 other Christians as opposed to 3,619,625 Muslims (pp. 9-10). Zohrab, who became an Armenian deputy in the Ottoman Parliament after the Young Turk revolution of 1908, was murdered in 1915 during the first stages of the Armenian Genocide.

<sup>10</sup> The name Kurdistan for this area was relatively new. F.D. Greene provides an interesting explanation: "The term Kurdistan, which in this region the Turkish government is trying to substitute with the historical one Armenia, has no political or geographical propriety except as indicating the much larger area over which the Kurds are scattered. In this vague sense it applies to a stretch of mountainous country . . . between Erzingan and Malatiah, and sweeping east and south over into Persia as far as Kermanshah." See Frederick Davis Greene, *The Armenian Crisis and the Rule of the Turk* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Norman, *Armenia and the Campaign of 1877*, p. 294.

Only a small number of youth in Erzerum, who gathered around educational institutions and clubs, considered ways to cast off the oppressive yoke. They sensed the impending encounter of the Turkish and Russian armies and foresaw the danger Armenians would face. There is evidence that even before the outbreak of war in 1877, many Armenians in Erzerum expected the tsarist armies to cross the border and liberate the Christians of the Ottoman Empire. Some Armenians began to prepare themselves, including a few merchants who secretly bought arms and had them transported to Erzerum to distribute among the populace.<sup>12</sup> But arming Armenians was not an easy task. Few Armenians were mentally or physically prepared to move.

A large faction of the Armenian leadership, especially in Constantinople, opposed any form of resistance. For this group, the path to emancipation and freedom lay only through enlightenment by establishing schools and spreading education among the ignorant masses. This approach, however, was seen as inadequate by some, including a small but influential segment of the clergy, which in general was very conservative. Khrimian Hayrik and Eghishe Vardapet Ayvazian, for example, were among those who favored resistance and tended to believe that education alone could not save the nation.

In Erzerum, many notables and young intellectuals undertook initiatives to raise the collective self-awareness of the masses through education and cultural programs. The Krtakan Enkerutian (Educational Society) pioneered the movement in 1876 with lectures and Sunday classes in its *varzharan* or school.<sup>13</sup> Even this modest endeavor aroused the suspicion of the authorities, ironically precipitated by the fears and complaints of the conservative Armenian primate of Erzerum, Bishop Harutian, and the society was soon dispersed.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Hakob M. Nshkian, *Arajinkaytser: Ejme Karnozartonken* [The First Sparks: A Page from Karin's Revival] (Boston: Baïkar Press, 1930), pp. 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> The Azatutian Hayrenasirakan Miutian (Liberty Patriotic Society), organized in 1874 by Khachatur Kereksian, is not considered here. The short-lived group is discussed briefly in Rafik P. Hovhannisyan, *Arevelahay azgayin azatagrakan sharzhumnere ev Karini "Pashtpan Hayreniats" kazmakerputyune* [The Western Armenian National Liberation Movements and the "Protectors of the Fatherland" Organization of Karin] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1965), p. 88.

### *In the Web of Ideas and Approaches*

In the 1860s Armenian political thought was taking its first steps toward the subsequent manifestation of political parties. However, while the shared vision of political thinkers was the deliverance of the Armenian people, the means to reach that goal differed greatly. Some believed that Armenians should trust the government and solicit European intercession with the Sublime Porte, never aggravating the government or giving it a pretext to use force. Such thinking prevailed especially among proponents of the Armenian National Constitution who had put so much effort into its formulation and adoption and who attached great hope to its application. According to Krikor Odian (Grigor Otian), one of the principal authors of the Sahmanadrutiun, revolution required blood, and Armenians did not have the blood to spare. A second group, mostly youthful hardliners, pushed for revolution, arousing the masses, organizing demonstrations, defending people's rights, even if this meant "beating up a Turk every day," they jested. As Hakob Nshkian attests, in Erzerum that was a favorite pastime of a certain Avetis Pashmaghchian, whom everyone knew and called *barekargich* (discipliner) or, as the Muslims labeled him, *Islamlare terbie idior* (He disciplines the Muslims).<sup>14</sup> A third group advocated working with the Armenian populace to awaken in them the aspiration for freedom and justice. It was not necessary to preach revolution, this group believed, as people themselves had to come to the realization that resistance was unavoidable.

The reverberations of all these thoughts and currents reached Karin/Erzerum and found followers. In keeping with the third school of thought, Nshkian and a few of his friends sought to purchase a large piece of land in the Basen district. The location in the eastern reaches of the province was carefully chosen because it was surrounded by Armenian villages. The group, which called itself the Erkragortsakan Enkerutian Varchutiun (Agricultural Society Administration), planned to build a model farm with modern agricultural machinery and through that farm to work among the peasantry, but the undertaking was stymied

---

<sup>14</sup> Nshkian, *Arajin kaytser*, p. 112.

by interference and threatened prosecution by the authorities. While there were different approaches and ideas, one thing was clear for active youth in Erzerum, as in all parts of the Ottoman Empire: the situation was intolerable and something had to be done. The outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877 was a turning point in the history of the development of political thought and the future struggle for freedom among the Armenians of Erzerum.

### *The Impact of the Russo-Turkish War*

In November 1877, while the war was raging, Sultan Abdul-Hamid II ordered a general conscription of all eligible men from seventeen to forty-five years of age. Through Patriarch Nerses Varzhapetian, he also called for Armenian volunteers. The Armenian National Assembly (Azgayin Zhoghov), representing the Armenian millet, took a daring step by declining the request, rationalizing that Armenians had already paid their required military exemption fees and had made financial contributions to the army beyond their means. Besides, it was argued, Armenians were not mentally and physically prepared to participate because they had never been allowed to serve in the regular armed forces.<sup>15</sup> The sultan viewed this decision as a sign of disloyalty, as he had a year earlier when the Armenian National Assembly had forwarded the report about exploitations in the provinces. In truth, the high hopes of the Constantinople Armenian intelligentsia and the National Assembly regarding the government's good will had ebbed by this time. Conditions clearly showed that the Armenian National Constitution had little impact in the provinces. The Armenian population gained no new rights and was not protected against Turkish and Kurdish excesses, and the government showed no interest in alleviating the situation. Moreover, with the war as a pretext the sultan made no attempt to prevent new waves of Kurdish violence against the Armenians. Mistrust had grown on all sides.

---

<sup>15</sup> For more details on the Armenian National Assembly's deliberations and reasoning regarding the degree of voluntary Armenian participation in the war, see Geghamiants, *Hayeri azatagrakan sharzhumnere*, pp. 325-35.

Under such conditions, many Armenians welcomed the entrance of the victorious Russian army into Erzerum. C.B. Norman explained:

Scarcely an Armenian village in the country has escaped their [the Kurds] heavy hands. They do not content themselves with stealing, plundering and murdering their weaker and unarmed fellow subjects, but they outrage and violate every girl on whom they can lay their hands. The stories that reach us—stories from too authentic a source to admit of doubt—are perfectly unfit for publication. The Ottoman Government are showing great want of policy in encouraging, arming and feeding these men, who, useless in action, are causing all the Christians of Armenia to turn with thankfulness to the Russians as their deliverers, instead of aiding the Government with all the means in their power to repel the Muscovite aggressor.<sup>16</sup>

This assessment runs counter to the Turkish contention that Armenians were traitors who sided with the enemy and also challenges Soviet Armenian historiography, which ascribed the enthusiastic Armenian reception of the Russians and later the mass migration to the Caucasus to an unequivocal love for and trust in the Russians.

The rejection of the call for troops by the National Assembly did not prevent the government from fleecing Armenians under the pretext of offsetting the expenses of the war. Many Armenians were forcibly conscripted to carry heavy arms and machinery. There was no conspiracy against the government, no cooperation with the Russian army, no volunteers from Turkish Armenia fighting on the Russian side. Nevertheless, Armenians could not avoid the repercussions of the war. Norman reported:

Hordes of fanatics led by Moolahs have joined the Turkish army; their fury, daily fed by the exhortations and addresses of the priests, who have denounced the war as a menace to the Ottoman religion, leads them to commit every conceivable excess against the defenceless Christians, whom they accuse of furnishing information to the enemy. Facts prove the reverse, for as yet not

---

<sup>16</sup> Norman, *Armenia and the Campaign of 1877*, p. 137.



a single Armenian spy has been discovered by the authorities, while several Kurds and Circassians, preferring money to faith, have paid for their treachery with their lives; in short, every spy hanged during this war has been a Mohammaden.<sup>17</sup>

These circumstances caused many Armenians to rejoice with thoughts of deliverance and freedom during the Russian occupation of the eastern provinces. Some intellectuals even began to contemplate the future structure of an autonomous Turkish Armenia with Erzerum at its center. Grigor Artsruni, a prominent Eastern Armenian political thinker, suggested that with the realization of an autonomous Armenia, the National Assembly should be moved from Constantinople to either Van or Erzerum.<sup>18</sup> The scheme for an autonomous Turkish Armenia was reportedly also accepted by the sultan. Although the sultan's acquiescence seems unbelievable, the speculation was, as Zohrab put it in hindsight, that the Ottoman government, in fear of losing the eastern provinces to Russia, encouraged the Armenians to seek autonomy under Ottoman sovereignty for the Armenian-populated provinces. Zohrab added that the decision was prompted by despair and that once the crisis had passed the idea was quickly dropped.<sup>19</sup>

Anticipation ran high. Karapet Ezian (Ezov) and many other Armenian conservative intellectuals in Russia looked to the tsar to liberate Western Armenia just as earlier tsars had emancipated the Armenians and Georgians of the Caucasus from Persian and Turkish rule.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, Ezian viewed the Treaty of San Stefano that concluded the Russo-Turkish War in March 1878 as a major breakthrough. Even earlier, in a letter to Ezian in December 1877, another Russian Armenian conservative thinker expressed the hope that the Great Powers would extend their protection over the Armenians, that Armenians would prosper,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>18</sup> Norayr Sarukhanyan, *Haykakan Hartse minchkhorhrdayin hay hasarakakan kaghakakan miki ev patmagrutyan mej* [The Armenian Question in Pre-Soviet Armenian Civic Political Thought and Historiography] (Erevan: Genocide Museum and Institute, 1997), p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Léart, *La Question Arménienne*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Sarukhanyan, *Haykakan Hartse*, p. 163.

not dispersed throughout the Ottoman Empire but in Armenia proper, and that Armenia would become not just a historical and geographical term but an administrative entity.<sup>21</sup> The issue of Armenian autonomy was dropped in the Treaty of San Stefano. Rather, Erzerum was to be returned to the Ottoman Empire, although there was at least a strong clause requiring reforms in the Armenian provinces.

Political speculations and hopes for the future—as well as fear and disappointment—surged, with a direct effect on the Armenians in Erzerum. The Russian occupation of the region had made a difference in the lives of the Armenians. They came into contact with Russian Armenian military commanders, such as the generals M.T. Loris-Melikov, I.I. Lazarev, and A.A. Ter-Ghukasov, as well as many lower ranking officers who encouraged them to take action, arm themselves, and defend their honor and their possessions. They were awed witnesses to the confidence of these professionals. The presence of an Armenian, Kostandin Kamsarakan, as the assistant military governor of Erzerum (later Russian vice consul there and then at Van) was also impressive. Coincidentally, Tserents (Hovsep Shishmanian), the noted Armenian novelist and political activist, was also in Erzerum, spreading his aura with analytical articles and authoritative opinions on the present situation and the future of Armenia. His novels, although historical in context, were examples of patriotism and heroic self-defense for contemporary Armenians to emulate. The Armenians of Karin stirred with excitement.

Optimism regarding the good will of the European powers was still strong. The newspaper *Meghu Hayastani* editorialized: "It is not possible even to think that the Great Powers would deceive a poor, powerless nation in need of protection. And why should they deceive? What is there to fear?"<sup>22</sup> Was this political naiveté or credulity based on despair? Whatever the case, the turn of events led to the revision of the Treaty of San Stefano and its favorable terms through the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878. The article relevant to the Armenians was now stated in general

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> *Meghu Hayastani* [Bee of Armenia] (Tiflis), 1878, no. 26, cited in Sarukhanyan, *Haykakan Hartse*, p. 49.

terms, that is, that the sultan would implement reforms in the Armenian-inhabited provinces, which were not specified, and that responsibility for overseeing the reforms, instead of devolving upon Russia while the imperial armies still stood in Erzerum, would fall on the European powers collectively after those armies had withdrawn.<sup>23</sup>

During the brief Russian occupation of Erzerum, cultural life had blossomed. A theatrical group, for example, the Taterakan Enkerutian (in some sources, Taterasirats Enkerutian), was organized. A novelty in the eastern Ottoman provinces, the dramatic troupe intended to entertain and enlighten Armenians, but it had the capacity to reach out to Turks as well. The performances were also attended by Russian army officers and European officials in Erzerum. The choice of repertoire was significant, mostly pieces by playwrights such as Petros Durian (Bedros Turian) and Mktrich Peshiktashlian (Mgrdich Beshigtashlian), whose works embodied the heroic past of the Armenian people and aimed at instilling national pride. Other groups formed to spread enlightenment in the region of historic Karin included the Ghevondiants, the Mamikoniants, and the Bardzr Hayots societies.<sup>24</sup>

### *Reaction to Despair*

The withdrawal of the Russian army from Erzerum in August 1878 left the Armenians in despair. Renewed atrocities ensued, as Muslim mobs, free of the constraining Russian presence, vented their rage against the Armenian population.<sup>25</sup> Previously, General Lazarev ordered the hanging in Geul-Bash of two mulahs who had incited bloodshed, but the effect was only temporary. Norman reported: "As long as Kurd Ismail Pasha is at the head of a Turkish force, so long will the Kurds be allowed to

---

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the treaties of San Stefano and Berlin, see Richard G. Hovannisian, "The Armenian Question in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1914," in Hovannisian, *The Armenian People*, vol. 2, pp. 208-12.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham Giulkhandanian discusses the activities of these groups in "Heghapokhakan sharzhume Karini mej" [The Revolutionary Movement in Karin], *Hairenik Amsagir* 17 (July 1939): 125.

<sup>25</sup> For details of this new wave of violence, see Norman, *Armenia and the Campaign of 1877*, pp. 285-99.

carry on their war of creeds with impunity.”<sup>26</sup> He sanctioned the outrages of Sheikh Jalaaladdin. Horrified by the prospect of continued persecution, Armenians began a mass exodus toward the Russian frontier. Significantly, however, both Turkish Armenian and Russian Armenian leaders opposed this relocation as being tantamount to political suicide.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the mass migration to the Russian Caucasus would alter the demographic ratios of Erzerum province and make implementation of reforms all the more difficult. General Lazarev’s appeal to the populace not to follow his army but to remain on the ancestral lands was of no avail. It is ironic that Lazarev asked Ismail Pasha, formerly *vali* (governor) of Erzerum and now the commandant of the right wing of the Turkish army, for help in dissuading the Armenians from leaving.<sup>28</sup>

The initial hope for reforms under the supervision of the Great Powers quickly dissipated. There were no signs that the government would undertake such a program or that the European powers would intervene. Meanwhile, oppression increased. To secure his rule, Sultan Abdul-Hamid systematically restricted the rights of Christians and encouraged assaults on them. On the occasion of a brawl between Turks and Armenians in Erzerum, Mkrtich Pallarian, a member of the Armenian National Council (Azhgayin Varchutiun), expressed his conviction that Muslim religious fanaticism would be a major obstacle to the implementation of reforms.<sup>29</sup> The government’s policy was to decrease the Armenian concentration in the eastern provinces by sporadic harassment and massacre to encourage expatriation. These tactics, together with falsifying statistical and demographic data, were

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 299. After a personal interview with Ismail Pasha in Erzerum, Norman wrote (p. 69): “I left him, impressed with the idea that the Porte could not have found a more bigoted, fanatical or worthless man for the post of *Vali* of Erzerum.”

<sup>27</sup> Giulkhandanian, “Heghapokhakan sharzhume,” p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Lazarev’s letter to Ismail Pasha is cited in Giulkhandanian, “Heghapokhakan sharzhume,” p. 123, using Leo (Arakel Babakhanian), *Tiurkahay heghapokhutian gaghaparabanutiune* [The Ideology of the Turkish Armenian Revolution], vol. 1 (Paris: Pabri Eghbarts, 1934).

<sup>29</sup> Excerpt from a letter to Nshkian, July 14, 1879, in Nshkian, *Arajin kaytser*, pp. 74-75.

used to evade reforms and European intervention.<sup>30</sup>

As predicted, conditions grew worse after the Russian departure and especially after Fazli Pasha arrived as the new military commander of Erzerum. Gatherings were banned; petitions were scorned; protests were punished. All the previously active Armenian organizations in Erzerum, such as Krtakan Enkerutian, Taterakan Enkerutian, and Mamikonians, were dissolved. In these difficult times rumors began to circulate that Russian Armenian volunteers were gathering beyond the border to come to the rescue of their Turkish Armenian brethren. Nshkian cites one of Khrimian Hayrik's letters in which there is a hint of such a movement. Volunteers may indeed have existed, but they soon dispersed, perhaps because there was no commensurate action by the Turkish Armenians or because of obstacles created by the Russian government.<sup>31</sup> Individual initiatives nonetheless continued.

Erzerum was closer to Constantinople than was Van, the other center of Armenian political action, and with merchants constantly traveling to and from the capital news reached Erzerum quickly. Erzerum was also near the Caucasus and became the first major stop for Russian Armenian activists who crossed the border to come to the homeland, the *erkir*, to devote themselves to the cause of the Western Armenians. One of these young men was Ter Grigor Abrahamian. A priest and a revolutionary activist, he was sent by a group in Erevan which, according to Abraham Giulkhandanian, maintained contact with Khrimian Hayrik. Abrahamian entered the Erzerum vilayet in 1880 and circulated

---

<sup>30</sup> According to Giulkhandanian, in 1881 the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople provided the ambassador of Austria with the following data on the population in the province of Erzerum: Armenians, 136,147; Turks, 105,565; Kurds, 65,644; Kizilbashs, 23,858; Circassians, 1,202; Greeks, 1,315, for a total of 333,731. Zohrab (Léart, *La Question Arménienne*, p. 59) cites another statistical table of the Armenian Patriarchate in 1882, showing the Armenian population of the Erzerum vilayet to be 280,000 and of the six Armenian vilayets together to be 1,630,000. Lynch, on the other hand, gives the following figures for the Erzerum vilayet based on data of the Ottoman government: Armenians, 106,768; Muslims 428,495; Greeks, 3,270; other races, 5,969, for a total of 544,502. For the statistical data above, see Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume," p. 124, taken from the official Russian *Orange Book* (St. Petersburg: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1915).

<sup>31</sup> Nshkian, *Arajin kaytser*, pp. 114-15.

in the villages of the Alashkert district to encourage people to take up arms in self-defense.<sup>32</sup> Individual field agents and those who set a personal example of armed defense were instrumental in sensitizing some of the Erzerum youth, who saw that no reforms would be forthcoming and that conditions would only become worse unless they were willing to take matters into their own hands.

In May of 1881, six men came together to form the core of what was to grow into the first quasi-revolutionary organization in the Erzerum region. Khachatur Kereksian, Karapet Nshkian, Hakob Ishgalatsian, Aleksan Etelikian, Hovhannes Asturian, and Eghishe Tursunian, with Hakob Nshkian as adviser, formed the Pashtpan Hayreniats (Protectors of the Fatherland),<sup>33</sup> identified in some sources as Gaghtni Enkerutiun Bardzr Hayots (Secret Society of Upper Armenia).<sup>34</sup> The society's goal was the defense of the Armenian villages against Kurdish raids by arming in complete secrecy multiple units of ten able and trustworthy men.<sup>35</sup> The arms were procured through contributions or loans of wealthy Armenians in Karin. According to Hakob Nshkian, the "membership" reached into the hundreds within two to three months, and there was a demand for arms from all over the province. Bishop Maghakia Ormanian, who at the behest of the Erzerum Armenians had finally succeeded the ill-famed prelate, was aware of this organization and cautiously supported it. Tacit encouragement also came from Patriarch Nerses Varzhapetian, who upon learning about the organization's goals and activities, is reported as saying to Nshkian: "I wish you people of the

---

<sup>32</sup> Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume" (Aug. 1939): 60.

<sup>33</sup> The most detailed information about this organization is provided by Nshkian, *Arajin kaytser*, pp. 115-46.

<sup>34</sup> See Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume," pp. 54-62, who names Kara-Melik (Barsegh Melik-Grigorian) as a person with reliable knowledge about the organization. Giulkhandanian refers to Kara-Melik's *Zinagorts kahana* [Gunsmith Priest], published in Vienna in 1896.

<sup>35</sup> For precautionary reasons, the organization adopted a system in which each member of the core group would delegate his very trusted friends to form their own groups of ten and these ten would know only their own group leader. They would take an oath to serve the organization in secrecy. The most capable and trustworthy men within these groups would in turn be delegated to form new groups of ten, allowing the organization to multiply in secrecy.

provinces had thought of working independently much sooner and did not wait for plans and ideas to come from Constantinople."<sup>36</sup> Even before that, Khrimian Hayrik had encouraged the first faltering steps of the Erzerum youth. In a letter to Nshkian he noted the example of Van where the youth "were now armed with guns and with hope." He alluded to the revolutionary activities in Van and to the optimism that the change of government in England had inspired. William Gladstone, regarded as a friend of the Armenians, had replaced Benjamin Disraeli, and Armenians hoped that his cabinet would be more favorable to the Armenian cause.<sup>37</sup> Hence, while the moral support was there, finding the means to procure arms to meet the increasing need remained a problem.<sup>38</sup>

The popularity of this secret organization tempted the leaders to neglect the extreme caution and secrecy that were originally observed. They composed a pledge of allegiance, which ended with the phrase, *Azatutian kam Mah* (Liberty or Death). The pledge, by which the members were inducted, was printed on attractive leaflets with a coat of arms at the top showing two swords crossed and two hands held together as a symbol of unity. The pledge was distributed among the members to sign and return. Ormanian did not approve of this and viewed it as bravado. Years later, in a biography of Father Garegin Vemian (the gunsmith priest known as Avetis), Barsegh Melik-Grigorian (Kara-Melik) wrote about a meeting of the organization that he attended. Avetis criticized the organization's tactics, arguing that the Armenian peasants were ignorant; they would sign the pledge and then do nothing, think nothing, and, like soldiers, wait

---

<sup>36</sup> See Nshkian, *Arajin kaytser*, p. 119.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume" (July 1939): 127, refutes Leo's statement that Bagrat Navasardian, a prominent physician in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), came to Erzerum to help establish the new organization and became a major financial supporter of the Protectors of the Fatherland (Leo, *Tiurkahay hegchapokhutian gaghaparanutune*, p. 139). Giulkhandanian contends that there was only a one-time contribution of 1,300 to 1,500 rubles and no steady relationship between the group and the Tiflis intellectuals. On the other hand, Giulkhandanian (Aug. 1939: 58) also cites Kara-Melik, according to whom Grigor Artsruni and Bagrat Navasardian belonged to a group in Tiflis which sent Kara-Melik to Erzerum to learn about the new organization and collaborate with its leaders.

for orders to come from above, while the organization would have nothing to tell them. Weapons were what they needed, he insisted, and there were not enough to arm the people. Avetis pointed out that of the more than 2,000 guns he had made, sadly, less than 100 had been bought by Armenians. The Turks and the Kurds knew that in order to live in this country they needed to be armed. Avetis believed that the organization should act quickly to train and arm the people for self-defense.<sup>39</sup>

The leaders finally realized that the written material was a liability because it would expose the group. They collected and burned the papers, but, as Nshkian attests, one leaflet remained in the hands of an adventurer, and with the help of Armenian informers the government laid hands on it.<sup>40</sup> The arrest of 70 to 80 members followed in late November 1882. Homes in the city and the villages were searched, and some guns and documents were discovered. Fifty-two members were charged and imprisoned. Writing about the trials, Sarukhan, an eyewitness, cites the charges read by the prosecutor, stating that the group intended through revolution to detach the Erzerum region from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>41</sup> The interrogations and the lengthy trial of the prisoners reverberated throughout the country and abroad. It became a phenomenal event, actually the first political trial of Armenian activists in the empire. The proceedings were reported

---

<sup>39</sup> Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume" (Aug. 1939): 56-57, provides a brief account of Avetis' adventurous life. After the suppression of the Protectors of the Fatherland, in order to help the Armenians of Erzerum, the gunsmith became a priest. But even in his religious garb he brought together young men, trained them to use arms, and circulated with them from village to village to defend Armenians against Kurdish assaults. He was loved by the people, but the conservatives of Karin considered him a threat to their own safety, fearing that his conduct would give the government the pretext to exercise force. Driven out of Erzerum, he became a bandit under the name of Khurshud Chavush and joined Ibo, the Kurdish brigand. Together, they attacked and robbed Turkish officials, especially tax collectors. In 1892, when the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF; Dashnaktsutun) became active in Karin, he became Father Garegin, joined the party, and acted as a field agent.

<sup>40</sup> Giulkhandanian cites Kara-Melik and Sarukhan (another historian of the organization), both of whom point to Father Mikayel, a wicked priest, as the traitor who out of spite turned in the names. Nshkian, however, believes that Boghos Sarafian, a government agent, was the culprit.

<sup>41</sup> Sarukhan's account was published in the journal *Gorts* [Work] in Baku in March 1917. See Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume" (July 1939): 130-31.



with exaggerated pathos in Armenian papers everywhere. The size and activities of the organization were also exaggerated. The group was lauded and idealized to become a source of inspiration for Armenian student movements, especially in Russian universities. For example, the Hay Usanoghneri Enkerutian (Society of Armenian Students), organized in Moscow in 1883, was directly inspired by the Protectors of the Fatherland.

In the wake of the exposure of the Pashtpan Hayreniats, the situation grew worse. The prelate Ormanian, suspected of collaboration with the conspirators, was ousted. The government reacted promptly and harshly, looking upon the revolutionary activities as evidence of an empire-wide insurgency movement, even though it soon became apparent that the organization worked alone with no connections beyond Erzerum. The prisoners were given heavy sentences, but, through the intervention of influential Constantinople Armenians, most were released by September 1886. Thus, the armed struggle of the Erzerum Armenians was stifled almost from the outset. Political activities were paralyzed for several years. The government's repression caused another relapse in the slowly evolving Armenian revolutionary movement, but it also brought to the fore the need for a better and stronger organization to stand against oppressive rule and the exploitation of the Kurdish and Turkish beys and aghas.

### *A Period of Preparation*

The period between 1883 and 1890 was one of self-realization and self-education in Karin/Erzerum. The main sources of inspiration were the admonitions and encouragement of Khrimian Hayrik through his words and messages. His writings about the deplorable reality in Erzerum, such as *Haygoz*h (Armenian Lament) on the massacres of Armenians in Alashkert and Bayazit (Bayazed) in the aftermath of the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War, were especially effective. These were complemented by the novels of Raffi (Hakob Melik-Hakobian), such as *Jalaleddin* (the name of a Kurdish chieftain) and *Khente* (The Fool), in which the theme of armed struggle and self-defense is dominant.

During this period, the Armenakan society, the first formal Armenian political party (organized in 1885) emerged at Van.

The Hnchakian Revolutionary party, founded in Geneva in 1887, did not become active in the eastern Ottoman provinces until the 1890s.<sup>42</sup> The first political group to be formed in Erzerum was the Droshak (Banner) committee, organized in early 1890 by Tigran Okonian, a member of the Tiflis (Tbilisi) branch established in 1889. The Droshak circle expanded into a union called the Hay Eritasardats Enkerutiun (Society of Young Armenians), which later became an important component of the Hay Heghapokhakanneri Dashnaktsutiun (Federation of Armenian Revolutionaries). Immediately after the founding of the Dashnaktsutiun in Tiflis in 1890, Aram Aramian (Ashot-Tatul) and Keri (Arshak Gavafian) were also sent to their native Erzerum to organize revolutionary cells.

The government thought it had eradicated all political activity in Erzerum when it squelched the Protectors of the Fatherland. But the continuing oppression and lingering bitterness was to instigate new action. A new organization formed by school principal Gevorg Chilingirian and a number of students in whom he had instilled patriotism was joined by former members of the Protectors of Fatherland. The group met regularly in the prelacy's reading room until it was discovered by informers and had to change locations. It dispatched Tigran Kereksian (brother of Khachatur Kereksian, a founding member of the Protectors of the Fatherland) to Constantinople to inform and consult with Khrimian Hayrik. On his return, Kereksian met with Ruben Khan-Azat (Khanazatian), one of the founders of the Hnchakian party and the principal of an Armenian school in Trebizond. Khan-Azat suggested that the group join the Hnchakian party, and he sent a letter to Gevorg Chilingirian in that regard. The proposal was accepted and the activities of the Hnchakian party in Erzerum got off the ground.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> The Hnchakians organized impressive demonstrations and manifestations of self-defense before the party suffered a major debilitating split in 1896. Rostom, an ARF founder, asserts that after 1896 there were no Hnchakian bodies in Erzinka (Erzinjan), Karin, or Van. The Hnchakian party's centralized system and its leadership located in faraway Geneva, London, and Athens, impeded full-scale participation in the political and revolutionary activities in the heart of the homeland. See *Rostom* (Beirut: Hamazkayin Press, 1979), p. 124.

<sup>43</sup> See Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume" (Aug. 1939): 55.

Despite such small-scale secret activities during this period, the government's watchful eyes rendered any manifestation of political or revolutionary activity in Erzerum, as elsewhere, extremely difficult. Levon Sargisian, a member of a student group at Moscow University, came to Erzerum in 1888 to test the waters and to return with suggestions for a plan of action in Armenia. The atmosphere was so tense and government surveillance so tight, however, that the local Armenians shunned him. He was begged to leave in order not to endanger his own life and the lives of others. Sargisian returned to Russia after only eighteen days in Erzerum. Under such oppressive conditions, the unrest in the city on June 20, 1890, was a significant event, an outburst against persecution and the defiling of the Armenian church.

The Sublime Porte, in receipt of news that the Erzerum Armenians had stored a large quantity of arms in their cathedral and in the Sanasarian school, ordered the vali to take immediate action. According to Giulkhandanian and Mikayel Varandian, both of whom recorded similar accounts of the event, on Sunday, June 20, the police and the army raided the church premises and began their search in a most crude and insulting manner. Aggravated by their sacrilegious conduct, Armenians attending the mass confronted the intruders. The police, with bayonets bared, tried to force the demonstrators to disperse. Then gunfire sounded and soon, as if by prearrangement, the Turkish mob joined in. After three hours of fighting that left casualties on both sides, the clash came to an end. Armenians suffered heavy losses, with an estimated 100 dead and 200-300 wounded. Arrests were made and the city remained under martial law for weeks, during which the police and the army circulated freely, disregarding law and order, conducting house-to-house searches and making arbitrary arrests. Many individuals who feared arrest, Chilingirian among them, fled the city.<sup>44</sup> The details of this event may vary slightly in different sources, but what is important is that all sources close to the Dashnaktsutun describe the event as a spontaneous reaction to Turkish provocation. According to Varandian, the

---

<sup>44</sup> See Varandian, *Dashnaktsutun patmutiun*, pp. 53-54. See also Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume" (Aug. 1939): 55-57.

Dashnakist Vartkes Serengulian (Vardges Serenkulian), a future member of the Ottoman Parliament and a victim of the Genocide of 1915, took charge of the situation and led the resistance. Hnchakian sources, on the other hand, maintain that the uprising was organized by the Hnchakian body in Trebizond and carried out by local comrades Hakob Ishgalatsian and Khachatur Kereksian. These sources indicate that Ruben Khan-Azat believed the event would prompt action by the European governments and was disappointed that this did not occur.<sup>45</sup>

Echoes of the unrest spread beyond the Ottoman Empire. This was the first time that the Armenians of Erzerum were shedding blood in acts of resistance to the Turkish authorities. Although the bloody Sunday in Erzerum was a modest manifestation of protest, the news appeared in the European press and attracted reporters to the area. Excitement also gripped Armenian activists, for example, inspiring Sargis Kukunian, a university student in St. Petersburg, to abandon his studies, travel to the Caucasus to recruit a large group of young men, and embark on what became an ill-fated expedition across the Russo-Turkish frontier to fight for the cause of Western Armenians. The Erzerum event also inspired the *fedayi* (partisan) song, *Dzain me hnchets Erzrumi hayots lernerer* (A Call Sounded from the Armenian Mountains of Erzerum).<sup>46</sup> The inherent excitement and romanticism of the song are further evidence of the exaggeration that led to overestimating Armenian power and underestimating the government's resolve to crush the movement, a continuing miscalculation that was to end in frustration and disappointment. A month after this incident, the Hnchakians organized the Kum Kapu demonstration in Constantinople to protest the government's mishandling of the unrest in Erzerum. The response once again, however, was violent suppression.

---

<sup>45</sup> Hrand Gangruni (Hrant Kankrouny), *Hay heghapokhutiune osmanian brnapetutian dem, 1890-1910* [The Armenian Revolution against Ottoman Oppression, 1890-1910] (Beirut: [H. Kankrouny], 1973), pp. 104-07. Gangruni also names Hakob Nshkian as a member of the group of local comrades who supposedly carried out the uprising. Nshkian, however, had been in the United States since 1888 (*Arajin kaytser*, p. 10).

<sup>46</sup> In some historical sources, this song is ascribed to the Protectors of the Fatherland organization.

### *Romanticism and Frustration*

The 1890 disturbance in Erzerum was an isolated event, a manifestation of genuine protest and the development of political thought and aspirations among the Erzerum Armenians. It was followed by the increased boldness of individuals who formed their own fedayi groups and launched a daring campaign to defend Armenian villages against raids. Two such groups around Erzuka (Erzinjan) were led by Galust Arkhanian and Ruben Shishmanian, known as Keri of Dersim (Dersimi Kerin). After two years of acting separately, the groups met in the nearby Monastery of Surb Grigor Lusavorich (Saint Gregory the Illuminator) some time in 1892. With the help of Aram Achekbashian, a Hinchakian field agent present at the meeting, a plan of joint action was drawn up. The groups were reinforced and reorganized to undertake the defense of the region of Erzuka. Arkhanian's unit had a short life. The troop of 52 men was arrested and imprisoned in 1893. The fedayis were charged with the crime of sedition in their trial in April 1894, resulting in death sentences for the leaders, later commuted to life imprisonment, and long prison terms for the others. Arkhanian became ill and died in prison in 1905. The rest were freed after the Young Turk revolution in 1908.

Keri and his men joined the Dashnaksutun in 1895.<sup>47</sup> For three years, from 1896 to 1899, Keri tried to gain the collaboration of the Kurds in the Dersim district. This was part of a bold Armenian strategy to reach an understanding with the Kurdish people, who were repeatedly used by the Ottoman rulers to suppress the Armenians.<sup>48</sup> But the government was determined to abort any such rapprochement by punishing the implicated

---

<sup>47</sup> See Gabriel Lazian, *Demker hay azatagrakan sharzhumen* [Figures from the Armenian Liberation Movement] (Cairo: Houssaper, 1949), pp. 20-26.

<sup>48</sup> The first such attempts were Kara-Melik's activities in Karin, Erzuka, and Dersim. After joining the Dashnaksutun, he engaged in transporting arms to the *erkir* and continued to preach Armeno-Kurdish cooperation. In 1895, the supreme executive body of the Dashnaksutun, the Bureau, sent Kara-Melik to Erzerum to further that mission, but he arrived only to become a witness to the massacres. For more details on his activities, see *Rostom*, pp. 102-03, and Giulkhandanian, "Heghapokhakan sharzhume" (Aug. 1939): 58-59.

Kurds and Armenians. Keri, too, was arrested by the authorities and after four years in chains in solitary confinement was hanged in Erzinjan in 1903. His efforts may have helped to bear some fruit years later during and after the Armenian Genocide.<sup>49</sup>

The period from 1890 to 1895 was characterized by romantic plans, goals, and ideas, unrealistic expectations, ideological disputes and conflict within the leadership, dangerous factionalism, unwillingness and unpreparedness of the masses to become engaged, and reluctance of the wealthy to finance the resistance movement. The government's repression of the least attempt at self-defense added to the frustration. Not only were the implicated punished, but whole communities of men, women, and children were subject to the government's severe punitive actions.

In the atmosphere of idealism and total devotion to the *Surb Gorts* (Sacred Work), political clairvoyance and calculations had little place, leading to overestimation of Armenian power, revolutionary momentum, and the readiness of the masses to rise up against tyrannical rule. At the same time, the Ottoman government's means and determination to crush the Armenian movement were underestimated. The idealistic assessment of the possibility of a general insurrection and the unfounded optimism of some political elements prompted them to make pompous declarations on placards and leaflets posted on walls in towns and villages, arousing fear and anger among ordinary Turks. The government and religious leaders exploited those sentiments to rouse the Muslim population against the Armenians even in the remotest villages. Reverend Edwin M. Bliss, who was born in Erzerum in

---

<sup>49</sup> Lazian, *Demker*, pp. 16-18. Lazian notes that Keri, a native of Erzinka, was very much loved and respected among the Kurds of Dersim. The seeds of friendship and harmony he had sown may have germinated during the 1915 deportations and massacres of the Armenians of Erzinjan. Kurds in Dersim gave refuge to and saved the lives of many deportees. Still later, when the Russian army occupied Erzinjan and approached Dersim in 1916, the local Kurds collaborated with Kaytsak Arakel, Keri's comrade in arms, who was sent to that region by partisan commander Sebastatsi Murad to rescue Armenian survivors sequestered in Muslim households or forcibly converted to Islam. After Keri's arrest and incarceration, the Dashnaktsutun continued to negotiate with the Kurds, especially in Taron/Mush and Van, trying to work with their notables to curb the Kurdish penchant for killing and plunder. On earlier negotiations and occasional collaboration, see Varandian, *Dashnaktsutian patmutiun*, pp. 211-14.

a family of American missionaries and came to know Turkey intimately over the years, wrote that there was "general fear of an uprising of Christians, probably to be supported by the European governments." He added: "It was absurd, for not one Christian in a hundred, scarcely one in a thousand, had a weapon, while comparatively few Turks were unarmed."<sup>50</sup>

Another characteristic of this period was the lack of control and discipline, which can be attributed to the individual initiatives aimed at eliminating all obstacles in the path of revolution. This sometimes led to unfounded accusations and hasty punitive measures. One such example was the assassination in 1891 of Khachatur Kereksian, a founding member of the Protectors of the Fatherland, who was accused of treacherous acts against the Dashnaktsutium. The assassination, decided upon by the party's Erzerum central committee without the sanction of the Bureau in Tiflis, was carried out by Aram Aramian.<sup>51</sup> Later, in 1892, during the Dashnaktsutium's General Congress in Tiflis, Aramian, representing the Erzerum committee, was summoned to answer for his action. He rationalized the murder and went even further to propose that terror, especially against Turkish government officials, be adopted as a tactic of the organization. His experience in Erzerum had convinced him that it would be impossible to bring about a general insurrection in the Ottoman Empire in the way the Dashnaktsutium had envisioned during the party's founding meeting in 1890. His proposed tactic, which was rejected at the congress in 1892, involved the inevitable arrest and execution of the terrorist, for Aramian proposed that the person carrying out the act should not try to escape but rather should surrender in order not to endanger the lives of innocent persons.

The distance between romanticism and frustration is short, and

---

<sup>50</sup> Edwin Munsell Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities* (n.p.: Edgewood Publishing Co., 1896), p. 556.

<sup>51</sup> Dashnaktsutium's Bureau in Tiflis warned the Erzerum central committee against that action and after the assassination acknowledged wrongdoing and expressed regret. Martiros Shatirian ascribes this assassination to Okonian and mentions his murder by Kereksian's brother in Tiflis as an act of revenge. See Shatirian's memoirs, "Hayots hasarakakan sharzhumnerits" [From the Armenian Social Movements], transcribed by N. Hangoyts [Nikol Aghbalian], *Hairenik Amsagir* 1 (March 1923): 35.

in that agitated period, when there were so many heavy losses and failures, frustration was unavoidable. Indeed, ultimate devotion to the Armenian cause had crashed against the fear and aloofness of the masses on whose account lives were being sacrificed. Wealthy Armenians did not honor their word to finance the purchase of arms and other revolutionary activities. The government's reaction was more brutal than anyone could have anticipated. The British consul general in Erzerum, Clifford Lloyd, summarized in a dispatch of October 1890 the condition of the country under the following headings:

- I. The insecurity of lives and properties of Christians.
- II. The insecurity of their persons, and the absence of all liberty of thought and action.
- III. The unequal status of Christian and Mahometan in the eye of the Government.<sup>52</sup>

In this period of disillusionment, confusion and uncertainty clouded the goals. What were these? Reforms, autonomy, independence? What would these entail? Freedom? Freedom of what or from what? These terms had different meanings for different people. For the ordinary Erzerum Armenian, freedom meant relief from the heavy taxes exacted by authorities, the Kurdish chieftains, and Turkish absentee landlord beys and aghas or the right to move beyond the Russian border with their possessions. Frustration translated into animosity among the various classes of people. The pattern was true everywhere: antagonism among revolutionary activists, the wealthy, the conservative intellectuals, the cautious merchants, the city dwellers, and the peasantry.

Reverend Bliss made the following assessment:

Next to Van, Erzurum has been looked upon by the Armenians as belonging peculiarly to them, and as was natural the revolutionary party sought to exert their influence in it. That they so signally failed is but another proof of the inherent weakness of

---

<sup>52</sup> Cited in J. Castell Hopkins, *The Sword of Islam, or Suffering Armenia, Annals of Turkish Power and the Eastern Question* (Brantford and Toronto: Bradley-Garretson, 1896), p. 313.



the movement and the general conservatism of the nation in regard to aggressive action against the Turkish Government.<sup>53</sup>

### *The Massacres of 1895*

The city and province of Erzerum did not escape the widespread massacres of 1894-96. Ironically, the massacres were perpetrated without restraint in a city with so many international offices, including the French, British, Russian, and German consulates and the American mission house.

In September 1895, Rostom, a cofounder of the Dashnaktsutjun, entered Erzerum disguised as a merchant. He came with the mission to oversee the distribution of arms and the training of the people for self-defense. The party was deeply involved in trafficking arms and ammunition from Persia to the Ottoman Empire, and Rostom's presence in Erzerum was crucial. The arms were transported mainly through Alashkert, with Erzerum becoming an important center for distribution. As it happened, while in Erzerum, Rostom witnessed the massacre on October 30, 1895. The wave of bloodshed that had spread from Trebizond to Gumushkhane and Baiburt (Baberd) now reached Karin.<sup>54</sup>

As an eyewitness, Rostom described the commotion in the city.<sup>55</sup> About 20,000 Lazs, Circassians, Kurds, and other Muslims from the outside had joined the mob in the streets, looting, murdering, stripping and mutilating the dead, and burning the wounded.<sup>56</sup> A comparison of the size of the mob, even if somewhat exaggerated, with the total population of the city reflects the horrific impact of the rabble. Edwin Bliss estimated the population of the city before the massacres of 1895 at 40,000, with the majority being Turks. He described the Armenian com-

---

<sup>53</sup> Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities*, p. 415.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 416-26, for details of the massacre. Bliss recorded the eyewitness account of William N. Chambers, the resident American missionary in Erzerum. See also Johannes Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), pp. 5-7, 51-53; Hopkins, *The Sword of Islam*, pp. 366-67.

<sup>55</sup> See *Rostom*, pp. 50-54.

<sup>56</sup> Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities*, p. 416, states that these outsiders were "heroes" of the massacres of Trebizond, Baiburt, Erzinjan, Kemakh, and other places, who had come to Erzerum for "another similar game."

munity as "strong, both in numbers, wealth and character."<sup>57</sup> In spite of the enormity of the murderous horde, the slightest resistance, returning rifle fire from inside a house, was often enough to scare many looters away. But then the army interfered, cutting down those who dared to resist. It was in such a situation that Father Garegin (Avetis, the gunsmith), cut off from his comrades, fought alone in a house under siege. The soldiers, believing that a large troop was shooting from inside the house, did not dare to enter for a long time. When they finally charged, they found that they had killed one lone defender.

In Baiburt, where Armenians constituted a minority of the population, the slaughter did not start until an army unit arrived from military headquarters in Erzinjan to break the resistance and open the way for the mob to engage in the carnage. Many villages around Baiburt were wiped out without difficulty, but at Lus Hank, a young man fought back single-handedly, armed with the only gun in the village. Frightened by the unexpected fire, the mob scattered.

Rostom asserted that the massacres were not as thorough in the city of Erzerum and the surrounding villages because in some places the Armenians defended themselves. The British consul general also reported to his ambassador in Constantinople that the Turks avoided places where they knew the Armenians were armed.<sup>58</sup> In view of the fact that most of the Armenian villages in Erzerum were surrounded by Turkish and Kurdish settlements, the comparatively lower number of losses in the district is a significant phenomenon. Another important contributing factor was the benevolent conduct of some Turks in the city and some Kurdish beys and aghas in the villages. Rostom affirmed that even in the city, where the government troops were most active and where anti-Armenian agitations had been stoked for years, some quarters were spared, and many notable Armenians took refuge in Muslim homes.<sup>59</sup>

According to reports and eyewitness accounts, the role of the

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>58</sup> The letter, dated April 12, 1897, is cited in Varandian, *Dashnaksutian patmutiun*, p. 226.

<sup>59</sup> Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities*, pp. 421-22, gives a similar account.

mob in the massacres was secondary to that of the army, which in many places initiated the assault and committed most of the killing. The mob, on the other hand, with religious fanaticism and an appetite for Armenian belongings, looted and completed the murderous process. Bliss explained: "Political fear, religious fanaticism, lust for booty, have all entered in varying proportions in different places."<sup>60</sup> Ironically, at the time that Rostom was writing his report in February 1896, Van was still peaceful. There were no signs of an impending assault. Rostom warned that Van would not be an exception and that the government was only in a period of watchful waiting, because the Armenians of Van were more organized. Rostom had intended to stay in Erzerum for at least a year, but the massacres interrupted his mission. With the Armenian schools in which he was to teach closed, he left the city in November 1896, not to return until 1910.

The massacres added to the disillusionment and apprehensions of the Armenian activists:

First, the perpetrators were not punished; instead, the authorities forced the Armenian civil and religious leaders to sign fabricated affidavits that the Armenians had instigated the violence. Johannes Lepsius reported that in the case of Erzinjan, the Armenian bishop and council refused to buckle under the pressure to dispatch a telegraph to the sultan placing the blame on the Armenians. The arrest and imprisonment of many leaders followed.<sup>61</sup>

Second, the revolutionary movement had not been able to stir the Armenian masses to a general rising. Instead, with few exceptions, the Armenian population allowed itself to be victimized without showing strong resistance.

Third, the revolutionary activists were largely blamed for the calamities not only by European observers but also by the Armenians themselves. Indeed, there were those who believed the massacres to be the direct consequence of the Armenian underground movement. Many deemed it wise to stop all political

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 557. The descriptions and assessments of Bliss, Lepsius, and Rostom are very much alike.

<sup>61</sup> Lepsius, *Armenia and Europe*, p. 63.

activity and give no further occasion for the government's vengeance. Condemning the Armenian massacres while also severely criticizing the revolutionaries, Frederick Davis Greene differentiated between the peaceful Armenian masses and the revolutionist minority: "The real spirit and aim of the Armenian race, as a whole, is unfortunately obscured, in the mind of the public, by utterances and acts of a few irresponsible Armenian hot-heads, who have imbibed nihilistic views in Europe, and are trying, in a very bungling way, to apply them."<sup>62</sup> Reverend Bliss deplored the role of Hnchakian revolutionaries and termed as absurd Hnchakian plans to create an independent Armenia. He nonetheless asserted that "in not one single instance can it be fairly said that the great massacres, as at Erzurum, Harput, Diarbekir, etc., had any excuse in the presence of Armenian revolution. Granted, however, that the Huntchagist movement did harm, and it certainly did, it must be remembered that it was an almost inevitable development."<sup>63</sup> The singling out of the Hnchakians, aside from their open and irritating threats, was probably influenced by the fact that Bliss was stationed in Cilicia where the Hnchakian party was very active. Reverend Greene, for his part, explained the revolutionary movement as "the natural outcome of the horrible situation in Armenia since the treaty of Berlin" and warned that "the disease is bound to grow more virulent and contagious until the European doctors apply vigorous and radical treatment to the 'Sick Man' [Ottoman Empire]."<sup>64</sup>

Fourth, the massacres demonstrated the inability or unwillingness of the European powers to prevent, to intervene, or to halt the outrages. Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy each had political and economic interests, and pushing the sultan too hard for the sake of the Armenians would only hinder their objectives.

Thus, once again the Armenians felt abandoned, their hopes and dreams shattered. Their incipient armed struggle to gain freedom and security had been thwarted.

---

<sup>62</sup> Greene, *Armenian Crisis*, p. 69.

<sup>63</sup> Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities*, pp. 557-58.

<sup>64</sup> Greene, *Armenian Crisis*, p. 83.

### *The Apex of Political Activism*

The revolutionary movement in Erzerum and the cultural, socio-economic, and political life in general in that region resumed after the restoration of the Ottoman constitution in 1908, particularly during the years from 1910 to 1914. New educational establishments such as the Hripsimian girls' school were opened. The highly-regarded Sanasarian school flourished, and Karin became an important cultural center for the Armenian provinces. It had also become an exclusive field of influence and activity of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. During this period, Rostom returned to Erzerum, now as a representative of the supreme party Bureau, political field agent, and superintendent of the Armenian schools in the province. Other prominent Dashnakists in Karin were Simon Vratzian, Armen Garo (Garegin Pasdermajian), Dr. Hovsep Ter-Davtian Dr. Hakob Zavrian, Astvatsatur Khachaturian, and Eghishe Topchian.<sup>65</sup> The upsurge of party activities stirred the antagonism of Armenian conservatives. As a result, the trustees of the Sanasarian school decided in 1912 to close the institution, expel students labeled as troublemakers, and transfer the school to Sebastia (Sivas), even though the benefactor's will stipulated the maintenance of a modern educational institution in Erzerum.<sup>66</sup> Rostom and some of the faculty strove

---

<sup>65</sup> Vratzian stayed in Erzerum for a year before departing for Boston to assume the duties of editor of the *Hairenik* (Fatherland) newspaper. He returned in 1914 to participate in the Dashnaktsutium's Eighth General Congress and to take Rostom's place. Shortly after the outbreak of war he was arrested and imprisoned but as a Russian citizen was then expelled to Russia. For his ordeals in the Turkish prison and the trying experiences on the way to the Russian border, see Simon Vratzian [Vratsian], *Kianki ughinerov* [Along Life's Ways], vol. 1 (Cairo: Houssaper, 1955), pp. 162-88. Rostom had also invited Zapel Esayan, the well-known Western Armenian writer, to join the Sanasarian faculty, stressing the importance of the presence of an educated woman. By the time Esayan arranged to move to Erzerum, however, the world war erupted. See Esayan's article in *Rostom*, pp. 24-29.

<sup>66</sup> Lazian, *Demker*, p. 138. For more details, see the articles by Hovakim Arshakuni [Hovakimian] and Vratzian on Rostom in the volume *Rostom*, pp. 276-81, and pp. 193-209. Vratzian notes that during the Russian occupation of Erzerum in 1916, Rostom visited his erstwhile field of educational and revolutionary activity and was able to retrieve a number of papers and documents from the Sanasarian school building. He was deeply affected by the sight of the devastated city and its once-thriving Armenian life.

to keep the doors of Sanasarian open. The New Sanasarian began operations in September of that year. Through the efforts of Simon Vratzian, who was then in Boston as editor of *Hairenik*, the Educational Union of Karin (Karno Usumnasirats Miutium) was organized in 1912 and began to provide financial support for the schools in Erzerum.

In this brief period of optimism, there were great enthusiasm and flights of imagination regarding the future. The Armenians of Karin had their own periodical press, *Harach* (Forward) from May 31, 1909 to early 1914, sponsored by the Dashnaktsutium's Eritasardakan Miutium (Youth Union) and edited consecutively by Eghishe Topchian, Simon Vratzian, Shavarsh Misakian, and Pilos.<sup>67</sup> *Alik* (Wave) daily replaced *Harach* in the spring of 1914 but was published only until mid-July. *Erkir* (Homeland), published briefly in 1914, was also a continuation of *Harach*. Other periodicals were *Sirt* (Heart, 1911), a monthly in Karin and the organ of the Dashnaktsutium's Union of Workers, and *Aror* (Plough, 1909-14) in Erznka/Erzinjan. And these were only the party-sponsored papers in the province of Erzerum.

The active periodical press was a sign of socio-cultural progress and the advancement of political thought in Erzerum. The arming of the people and their training for self-defense continued along with the cultural activities.<sup>68</sup> Pilos, in the city of Erzerum, and Dro (Drastamat Kanayan), in Bayazit, among others, were engaged in that activity. In a letter to Simon Vratzian in Boston, Rostom gave assurances that the Dashnaktsutium was not only involved in educating the Erzerum Armenians but was also engaged in an arms-training program. Constantinople Armenian leaders, Rostom stated, were so taken with a new reform plan

---

<sup>67</sup> Just before the Ottoman Empire entered the war in 1914, Pilos and other young Armenian leaders in Erzerum enlisted in the Turkish army, thinking that their gesture would demonstrate the good will of the Armenians toward the government. Shortly thereafter, Pilos was arrested and being an officer was sent to the military prison, where it is likely he was murdered. See Vratzian, *Kianki ughinerov*, pp. 156-80.

<sup>68</sup> There were plans, as Rostom revealed in a letter, to gather every year at the Monastery of Surb Karapet (Saint John the Precursor—the Baptist) in Mush to revive the Navasardian athletic competitions, which in pre-Christian Armenia had been held annually to mark the New Year in the month of Navasard. See Rostom, p. 182.

that they could not see the reality. He was certain that reforms would never be implemented and that the Armenians had to rely on their own strength.<sup>69</sup>

Karin, in the heart of the *erkir*, had become a vital center of Armenian political life in the Ottoman Empire. A combination of factors had made the Dashnaktsutiun the predominant political force in the region.<sup>70</sup> The party's Eighth General Congress was held in Erzerum during the summer of 1914 to plan future activities and to devise strategies to function within the alarming atmosphere of an impending war. For some, the expectations based on the promulgation of a reform measure in February 1914 and the appointment of European inspectors-general to be headquartered in Erzerum and Van were high. However, the specter of a world conflagration was felt stronger with each passing day. Vratzian, writing from Erzerum, described the "hellish situation" as follows: "All men are drafted into the army. There are no shops open, no trade, no schools. Cultural life is at a standstill. The government has confiscated sugar, coffee, kerosene, rice, flour and has handed out receipts in return."<sup>71</sup> There was also a deterioration in the attitude of the Turks since early summer, an escalating mistrust and animosity toward the Armenians. Turkey was preparing to enter the war against the Entente Powers and viewed the Armenians as an important factor, or rather, a worrisome impediment.

This was the state of affairs when the ominous events began to unfold. The Young Turk government's policy of eliminating all obstacles to the realization of its objectives, which entailed above all the annihilation of the Armenian population of the empire, was implemented with horrific force. The eradication of Armenian life in Erzerum brought to an end the development of Armenian political thought and movements in the region except

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. 188-89.

<sup>70</sup> In a letter to the ARF Central Committee of America, dated August 25, 1914, Vratzian noted that the Sahmanadrakan Ramkavar (Constitutional Democrat) party opened a center in Karin, but it closed within a few months. See Simon Vratzian [Vratsian], *Hin tghter nor patmutian hamar* [Old Papers for Modern History] (Beirut: [Mshak], 1962), p. 78.

<sup>71</sup> The letter, dated September 1, 1914, was addressed to the ARF Central Committee of America. See Vratzian, *Hin tghter*, p. 81.

for a brief flicker in 1916-18, when Erzerum was under Russian occupation. By the end of World War I, Erzerum was entirely Turkish. Armenian Karin ceased to exist.





Dersimi Kerin  
(Ruben Shishmanian)



Keri  
(Arshak Gavafian)



Armen Garo  
(Garegin Pasdermajian)



Vardges  
(Vartkes Serengulian)



Rostom with Hripsimian School Faculty



Dashnaksutiun Building and Editorial Offices of *Harach*